THE YOKE

A Romance of the Days When the Lord Redeemed the Children of Israel From the Bondage of Egypt

By

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CHAPTER IX.

HEBREW CRAFT.

WHEN Mentu returned from On a light had kindled in his eyes and his stately step had grown elastic. The man that withdraws from a busy life while in full vigor has beckoned to death. Inactivity preys upon him like a disease. The great artist, forced into idleness by the succession of an incapable king, had been renewed by the prospect of labor which his exaltation into the high office of royal architect had afforded. With pleasure in his heart, Kenkenes watched his father grow young again.

"Who was thy good friend in this?" the young man asked one evening after a number of contented remarks concerning the murket's appointment. "Who said the word in the Pharaoh's ear?"

"So to raise me to this office it is needful that something more than my deserts must have urged the king?" Mentu retorted.

"Nay, that was not my meaning!" Kenkenes made haste to say. "But thou knowest, my father, that Meneptah must be forever directed. Who, then, offered him this wise counsel? Rameses?"

"It was never Har-hat," Mentu replied, but half placated.

"If he had, thou and I must no longer call him a poor counselor."

Mentu shook his head, but there was no more temper evident in his face.

"Now is a propitious hour for a good counselor," Kenkenes pursued.

"What knowest thou?" Mentu asked, with interest.

"Tape," the young man replied briefly.

"Nay, the sedition in Tape is old and vitiated."

"And the Hak-heb."

"That breach may be healed. But we have sedition to fear among the bond people"—

"The bond people!"

"Even so. Open and organized sedition."

"The Israelites?" Kenkenes exclaimed, with an incredulous note in his voice.

"The Israelites."

"I would sooner fear a rebellion among the draft oxen and the mules of Nehapehu" [the Fayum].

"The elder Seti's fears and the fears of the great Rameses were other than yours."

"Oh, aye, they had cause for fear then, but since Seti yoked the creatures"—

"The Pharaohs did not begin in time," the elder man interrupted. "Had that royal fiat, the decimation of Hebrew children, continued, we should not have had the Israelite today, but gods!" He shuddered with horror. "I hope that is a horrid slander—tradition, not fact. I like not to lay the slaughter of babes at the door of any Egyptian dynasty. but had an early Pharaoh of the house of Thothmes enforced the absorption of the Hebrew by his same rank among the Egyptians we should not have the menace of a hostile alien within our borders today. The heavy hand of oppression has made a wondrous race of them for strength. Theirs is no mean intellect. Great men have come from among them, and they will be a hardy foe arrayed against us."

"They are not warriors. They are poor and unequipped for hostilities. They are thoroughly under subjection," the young man pursued. "What can they do against us?"

"Do!" Mentu exclaimed with impatience in the repetition. "They have only to say to the banished Hyksos: 'Come ye, let us do battle with Egypt. We will be your mercenaries.' They have only to send greeting to that lean traitor Amon-meses, thus: 'Give us the delta to be ours and we will help you win all Egypt,' and there will be enough done."

"They must have a pact among themselves and a leader first," Kenkenes objected.

"Have I not said they are organized and their leader is found? He is a foster brother to Meneptah, an initiated priest of Isis, a sorcerer and an infidel of the blackest order. He is Prince Moses, a Hebrew by birth."

"Dost thou know him?" Kenkenes asked, with interest.

"Nay, he has dwelt in Midian these forty years. He returned some time ago and hath dwelt passively in Goshen till"—

The artist dropped his voice and came nearer to his son.

"He hath dwelt passively in Goshen till of late, and it is whispered that some secret work against him, inaugurated by the priesthood, or mayhap the Pharaoh, hath given him provocation to revolt against Meneptah."

After a silence Kenkenes asked in a lowered tone:

"Hath he made demonstration?"

"Oh, aye, he is clamoring to lead his people a three days' journey into the wilderness to make sacrifice to their god."

"Shades of mine ancestors! If that is all, let them, so they return," Kenkenes said amicably.

"Let them!" the sculptor exploded. "Dost thou believe that they would return?"

"I apprehend that the Rameside army would be capable of thwarting them if they were disposed to depart permanently."

"Thou dost apprehend—aye, of a truth I know thou dost! Halt all our works of peace for an indefinite time, mass the vast army of the Pharaoh and spend days and good arrows in retrieving the runaways merely that a barbarian god may smell the savor of holy animals sacrificed! Gods! Kenkenes, thou art as trustworthy a counselor as Har-hat!"

Thereafter there was a silence in the workroom. But a peppery man is seldom sulky, and Kenkenes was fully prepared for the mildness in his father's voice when he spoke again.

"Thou shouldst see the pretense in his demand, Kenkenes. He must have provocation to urge him to rebellion, and he knows full well that Meneptah will not grant that petition."

"But hath he not provocation? Thou hast but a moment ago told"—

"But that was only an offense against him. The whole people would not go into revolt because some one had conspired against one of their number. Therefore he telleth Israel that its God would have Israel make a pilgrimage, promising curses upon the people if they obey not. Then he putteth the appeal to the Pharaoh and the Pharaoh denieth it. Wherefore the whole people is enraged and hath rallied to the conspirator's cause. Seest thou, my son?"

"It is strategy worthy the incomparable Pharaoh"—

"It is Hebrew craft!"

"Perhaps thou art right. But what personal grudge hath Moses against Egypt or the priesthood or Meneptah?"

"It is said that he was wanted out of the way, and by an unfortunate sum of accidents, the miscarriage of a priest's letter and a fight between a messenger and Bedouins in front of a Hebrew tent gave the information into the hands of Moses himself."

By this time Kenkenes was on his feet.

"A miscarriage of a priest's letter," he repeated slowly.

The artist nodded.

After the silence the young man spoke again:

"And thou believest truly that because of this letter—because of this Israelite's grievance against the powers of Egypt—we shall have uprising and serious trouble among our bond people?"

"I have said," Mentu answered, raising his head as though surprised at the earnestness in his son's voice. Kenkenes did not meet his father's eyes. He turned on his heel and left the workroom.

Had the spiteful Seven, the Hathors, used him as a tool whereby mischief should be wrought between the nation and her slaves?

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When the imperative necessity of harmonious expression became apparent the young artist laid aside his chisel and mallet, and the Arabian desert knew his footsteps no more for many days after the rough hewing of Athor's face. Instead he mingled with the people of Memphis in quest of the expression. The pursuit became fascinating and all absorbing. With the most deliberate calculation he studied the faces of the betrothed and of newly wedded wives; and, finding too much of content therein, he sought out the unelect for study. And with these his search ended.

Thereafter he made innumerable heads in clay and covered linen scrolls

He made innumerable heads in clay.

with drawings. But it was the semblance he gained and not the spirit. The light eluded him.

On the day after Mentu's return from On, Kenkenes paid the first visit to Masaarah since the incident of the collar—and the last he thought to make until he had won that for which he strove. He went to bury the matting in the sand and to hide other evidences of recent occupancy about the niche. He left the block of stone undisturbed, for the transgression was not yet apparent on the face of Athor. The scrolls, which had been concealed under the carpeting, were too numerous for his wallet to contain, but he carried the surplus openly in his hand.

It was sunset before he had made an end. To return to the Nile by way of the cliff front would have saved him time, but there was a boyish wish in his heart to look again on the lovely face that had helped him and baffled him. So he descended into the upper end of the ravine and slowly passed the outskirts of the camp, but the bond girl was nowhere to be seen. The spaces between the low tents were filled with feeding laborers, and there was an unusual amount of cheer to be noted among Israel of Masaarah. Kenkenes heard the talk and laughter with some wonderment as he passed. He admitted that he was disappointed when, without a glimpse of Rachel, he emerged into the Nile valley. But he leaped lightly down the ledge, crossed the belt of rubble, talus and desert sand, and entered the now well marked wagon road between the dark green meadow land on either side. Egypt was in shadow—her sun behind the Libyan heights—but the short twilight had not fallen. Overhead were the cooling depths of sky, as yet starless, but the river was breathing on the winds and the sibilant murmur of its waters began to talk above the sounds of the city. To the north, the south and the east was pastoral and desert quiet; to the west was the gradual subsidence of urban stir. Frogs were beginning to croak in the distance, and in the long grain here and there a nocturnal insect chirred and stilled abruptly as the young man passed.

Within a rod of the pier some one called:

"My master!"

The voice came from a distance, but he knew whom he should see when he turned. Halfway across the field toward the quarries Rachel was coming, with a scroll in her lifted hand. He began to retrace his steps to meet her, but she noted the action and quickened her rapid walk into running.

"Thou didst drop this outside the camp," she said as she came near. "I feared it might have somewhat pertaining to the statue on it, and I have brought it, with the permission of the taskmaster." She stopped and, putting her hand into the folds of her habit on her breast, hesitated as if for words to speak further. Kenkenes interrupted her with his thanks.

"How thou hast fatigued thyself for me, Rachel! Out of all Egypt I doubt if I might find another so constant guardian of my welfare. The grace of the gods attend thee as faithfully. I thank thee most gratefully."

The purpose in her face dissolved; the hand that seemed to hold somewhat in the folds of her habit relaxed and fell slowly. While Kenkenes waited for her to speak he noted that a dress of unbleached linen replaced the coarse cotton surplice she had worn before, and her feet were shod with simple sandals, an extravagance among slaves. But the garb was yet too mean. The sculptor wondered at that moment how the sumptuous attire of the highborn Memphian women would become her. He shook his head and in his imagination dressed her in snow white robes, with but the collar of rings about her throat, and stood back to marvel at his picture of splendid simplicity.

"Hast thou not something more to tell me?" he asked kindly. "Do thou rest here on the wharf while we talk. Art thou not quite breathless?"

"Nay, I thank thee," she faltered. "I may not linger." The hand once again sought the folds over her breast.

"Then let me walk with thee on thy way. It will be dark soon."

"Nay," she protested, flushing, "and again I thank thee. It is not needful." She made a movement as if to leave him, but he stepped to her side.

"Out upon thee, daughter of Israel! Thou art ungracious," he remonstrated laughingly. "I cannot think thee so wondrous brave. For it is a long walk to the camp, and the night will be pitch black. Why may I not go with thee?"

"There is naught to be feared."

"Of a truth? Those hills are as full of wild beasts as Amenti is of spirits. And even if no hurt befell thee the trepidation of that long journey would be cruel. Nay, Ptah, the gallant god, would spurn my next offering did I send thee back to camp alone. Wilt thou come?"

She bowed and dropped behind him. Her resolution to maintain the forms of different rank between them was not characteristic of other slaves he had known. There was no presumption or humble gratitude in her manner when he would offer her the courtesies of an equal, but he had met the disdain of a peer once when he thought he talked with a slave. There was something mocking in her perfunctory deference, but her pride was genuine. Her conduct seemed to say, "I would liefer be a Hebrew and a slave than a princess of the God forgotten realm of Egypt."

The young sculptor was unruffled, however. He was turning over in his mind, with interest, the evidence that tended to show that the Israelite had something more to tell him, that her courage had failed her and that her hand sought something concealed in her dress. He recalled the former meetings with her and arrived at a surmise so sudden and so conclusive that with difficulty he kept himself from making outward demonstration of his conviction. "The collar, by Apis! I offended her with the trinket. And she came to make me take it back, but her courage fled. Fie upon my clumsy gallantries! I must make amends. I would not have her hate me."

He broke the silence with an old, old remark—one that Adam might have made to Eve.

"Look at the stars, Rachel. There is a dark casement in the heavens—a blink of the eye and the lamp is alight."

"So I watch them every night. But they are swifter here in Memphis. At Mendes, where Israel toiled once, they are more deliberate," she answered readily.

"Aye, but you should see them at Philae. They ignite and bound into brilliance like sparks of meeting metal and flint. Ah, but the tropics are precipitate!"

"I know them not," she ventured.

"Their acquaintance is better avoided. They have no mean; they leap from extreme to extreme. They are violent, immoderate. It is instant night and instant day; it is the maddest passion of summer always. Nature reigns at the top of her voice and chokes her realm with the fervor of her maternity. Nay, give me the north. I would feel the earth's pulse now and then without burning my fingers."

"There is room for choice in this land of thine," she mused after a little.

"Land of mine?" he repeated inquiringly, turning his head to look at her. "Is it not also thine?"

"Nay, it is not the Hebrews', and it never was," the clear answer came from the dusk behind him.

"So!" he exclaimed. "After 400 years in Egypt they have not adopted her!"

"We have but sojourned here a night. The journey's end is farther on."

"Israel hath made a long night of the sojourn," he rejoined laughingly.

"Nay," she answered. "Thou hast not said aright. It is Egypt that hath made a long night of our sojourn."

There was a silence in which Kenkenes felt accused and uncomfortable. It would require little to make harsh the temper of the talk. It lay with him, one of the race of offenders, to make amends.

"It is for me to admit Egypt's sin and ask a truce," he said gently, "so be thou generous to me, since it is I who am abashed in her stead."

Again there was silence, broken at last by the Israelite in a voice grown wondrously contrite.

"I do not reproach thee, nor, indeed, is all Egypt at fault. The sin lies with the Pharaohs."

"Ah, the gods forbid!" he protested. "Lay it on the shoulders of babes, if thou wilt, but I am party to treason if I but give ear to a rebuke of the monarch."

"I am not ignorant of the law. I shall spare thee, but I have purchased my right to condemn the king."

"Thou indomitable! And I accused thee of fear! I retract. But tell me, what is the journey's end? Is it the ultimate goal of all flesh?"

"Not so," she answered proudly. "It is Israel's inheritance, promised for 400 years. The time is ripe for possession. We go forward to enter into a land of our own."

"Thou givest me news. Come, be the Hebrews' historian and enlighten me. Where lies the land?"

Rachel hesitated. To her it was a serious problem to decide whether the lightness of the sculptor's tone were mockery or good fellowship. Kenkenes noted her silence and spoke again.

"Perchance I ask after a hieratic secret. If so, forgive the blunder."

"Nay," she replied at once, "it is no secret. All Egypt will know of it ere long. God hath prepared us a land wherein we may dwell under no master but Jehovah. We go hence shortly to enter it. The captain of Israel will lead us thither, and Jehovah will show him the way. Abraham was informed that it was a wondrous land, wherein the olive and the grape will crown the hills, the corn will fill the valleys, the cattle and sheep the pasture lands. There will be many rivers instead of one, and the desert will lie afar off from its confines. The sun will shine and the rain will fall and the winds will blow as man needeth them, and there will be no slavery and no heavy life therein. The land shall be Israel's, and its enemies shall crouch without its borders, confounded at the splendor of the children of God. And there will our princes arise and a throne be set up and a mighty nation established. Cities will shine white and strong walled on the heights, and caravans of commerce will follow down the broad roadways to the sea. There will the ships of Israel come bowing over the waters with the riches of the world, and our wharfs will be crowded with purple and gold and frankincense. Babylon shall do homage on the right hand and Egypt upon the left, and the straight smoke from Jehovah's altar will rise from the center unfailing by day or by night."

They had reached the ledge, and Kenkenes sat down on it, leaning on one hand across Rachel's way. She paused near him. Even in the dark he could see the light in her eyes, and the joy of anticipation was in her voice. As yet he did not know whether she talked of the Israelitish conception of supernal life or of a belief in a temporal redemption.

"And there shall be no death nor any of the world sorrows therein?" he asked.

"Since we shall dwell in the world we may not escape the world's uncertainties," she replied, looking at his lifted face. "But most men live better lives when they live happily, and I doubt not there will be less unhappiness, provident or fortuitous, in Israel the nation than in Israel enslaved."

So the slave talked of freedom as slaves talk of it—hopefully and eloquently. A pity asserted itself in the young sculptor's heart and grew to such power that it tinctured his speech.

"Is thy heart then so firmly set on this thing?" he asked gently.

"It is the hope that bears Israel's burdens and the balm that heals the welt of the lash."

And in the young man's heart he said it was a vain hope, a happy delusion that might serve to make the harsh bondage endurable till time dispelled it. The simple words of the girl were eloquent portrayal of Israel's plight, and Kenkenes subsided into a sorry state of helpless sympathy. She was not long in interpreting his silence.

"Vain hope, is it?" she said. "And how shall it come to pass in the face of the Pharaoh's denial and the might of Egypt's arms? Thou art young, and so am I, but both of us remember Rameses. There has been none like him. He overthrew the world, did he not, and it was a hard task and a precarious and a long one when he but measured arms with mortals. Is it not a problem worthy the study to ponder how he might have fared in battle with a god?"

Kenkenes lifted his head suddenly and regarded her.

"Aye," she continued. "I have given thee food for thought. Futile indeed were Israel's hopes if it set itself unaided against the Pharaoh. But the God of Israel hath appointed his hour and hath already descended into fellowship with his chosen people. He hath promised to lead us forth, and the Divine respects a promise. So a God against a Pharaoh. Doth it not appear to thee, Egyptian, that there approaches a marvelous time?"

"Give me but faith in the hypothesis and I shall say of a surety," he replied.

"Thou hast said. Shall we not go on, my master?"

"I am Kenkenes, the son of Mentu," he told her.

She bent her head in acknowledgment of the introduction and moved forward as if to climb up by the projecting edges of the strata, but he put a powerful arm about her and lifted her into the valley. With a light bound he was beside her. Ahead of them was profound darkness, hedged by black and close drawn walls and canopied by distant and unillumining stars. She resumed her place behind him, though he was moved to protest, but her deliberate manner seemed to demand its way, so they continued slowly.

"Thou givest me interest in the God of Israel," he said, to reopen the subject. "The Egyptian dwells in his gods, but thou sayest that the God of Israel dwells in Israel."

"Even so. But thou speakest of Israel's God even after the fashion of my people. They are jealous, saying that the true God hath but one love and that is Israel. If they would think it, let them, but he is the all-God, of all the earth, the one God—thy God as well as mine."

"Mine!" Kenkenes exclaimed.

"Thou hast said."

"Now, by all things worshipful, this is news. I had ever thought that our gods are those to whom we bow. Either thou sayest wrong or I have been remiss in my devotions."

"Nay, listen," she said earnestly, stepping to his side. "Already have I told thee of the captain of Israel. He was reared among princes in the house of the Pharaoh, and he is learned in all the wisdom of Egypt. He instructeth the elders concerning Jehovah, and from mouth to mouth his wisdom traverseth till it reacheth the ears of the young. This, then, I have from the lips of Moses, who speaketh naught but the truth. In early times all on earth had perished for wickedness by the sending of the one God, save a holy man and his three sons. These men worshiped the God of Abraham, who was the father of Israel. One of the sons founded thy race, saith Moses, and one established mine. The tribes that went into Egypt worshiped the same God. Lo, is it not written in the early tombs? So Moses testifieth, but if thou doubtest, go question thy historians. And some of the tribes called that God Ra, others Ptah, and yet others Amen. But in time they quarreled, and each tribe refused to admit the identity of the three named one God, saying, 'Thy God sendeth plague and affliction, and ours sendeth rich harvests and the Nile floods.' Did not the same God do each of these things in his wisdom? Even so. But when they were at last united into one great people they had forgotten the quarrel, forgotten that in the beginning they had worshiped one God, and they bowed down to three instead. Nay, if there were but one among you who dared, there are loose threads fluttering, which, if drawn, might unravel the whole fabric of idolatry and disclose that which it hides—the one God—the God of Abraham."

Kenkenes had walked in silence, looking down into the luminous eyes, lost in wonder. Rachel suddenly realized at what length she had talked and stopped abruptly, dropping back to her place again as if chidden.

"Come," said Kenkenes, noting her action, "walk beside me, priestess. I would hear more of this. It is like all forbidden things—wondrously alluring."

"I did forget," she answered stubbornly. "There is nothing more."

Kenkenes stopped.

"Come," he insisted. "The teacher rather precedes the pupil. At least thou shalt walk beside me."

"I pray thee, let us go on. We are not yet at the camp, we have walked so slowly," she answered. At that moment several fragments of rock, loosening, slid down in the dark just behind her. She caught her breath and was beside the young artist in an instant. He laughed in sheer delight.

"Thou hast assembled the spirits by thy blasphemy," he said. "And, remember, I must soon return to this haunted place alone."

"Thou canst get a brand of fire or a cudgel at the camp," she said, with some remorse in her voice, "and run for the river bank." With that she resumed her place behind him.

Kenkenes laughed again. It gave him uncommon pleasure to know that his model was concerned for him. He put out his hand and deliberately drew her up to his side. Not content with that, he bent his arm and put her hand under it and into his palm, so that she could not leave him again. She submitted reluctantly, but her fingers, lost in his warm clasp, were cold and ill at ease. He felt their chill and released her to slip about her shoulders the light woolen mantle he had worn. Her apprehension lest he take her hand again was so evident that he refrained, though he slackened his step and kept with her.

But she spoke no more until they were beside the outermost circle of coals that had been a cooking fire for the camp. Here they met a man, whom by his superior dress Kenkenes took to be the taskmaster. They were almost upon him before he was seen.

"Rachel!" he exclaimed.

"Here am I," she answered a little anxiously.

"Thou wast gone long"— he began.

The sculptor interposed.

"She hath done me a service, and it was my pleasure to talk with her," he said complacently. "Chide her not."

The glow from the fire lighted the young man's face, and the taskmaster, standing in deep shadow, scanned it sharply, but did not answer. Kenkenes turned and strode away down the valley.

Rachel snatched a thick sycamore club which had been left over in the construction of the scaffold and ran after him. But the young sculptor had disappeared in the dark.

"Kenkenes," she cried at last desperately. He answered immediately.

She slipped off the mantle.

"This, thy mantle," she said when he approached, "and this," thrusting the club into his hands. "There is as much danger in the valley for thee as for me." And like a shadow she was gone.

As he hurried on again through the dense gloom of the ravine the young man thought long on the Israelite and her words. She had offered him theories that peremptorily contradicted the accepted idea among Egyptians that Moses was inspired by a personal motive of revenge. The argument put forth by his father began to show sundry weaknesses. Furthermore, Rachel's version gave him a much coveted opportunity to slip from his shoulders the discomforting blame that had rested there since he had heard that a miscarried letter might effect a national disturbance. Much as the practical side of his nature sought to decry the great Hebrew's motive, a sense of relief possessed him.

"I fear me, Kenkenes, thou durst not boast thyself an embroiler of nations," he said to himself. "The Hebrew prince is a zealot, and zealots have no fear for their lives. Truly those Israelites are an uncommon and a proud people. But, by Besa, is she not beautiful!"

He enlarged on this latter thought at such exhaustive length that he had traversed the valley and field, found his boat, crossed the Nile and was at home before he had made an end.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

It Pays to Be Polite.

It does not cost anything to be polite to your friends and acquaintances, and incidentally it goes a long way toward making life pleasant for yourself.

A civil answer makes more friends than a gruff one and a smile succeeds when a frown fails.

We have no right to impose our little tempers and annoyances on our fellow-beings.

The fact that one person annoys us does not justify us in visiting it on the next person we meet.

And yet that is what a great many of us do. One trivial annoyance often upsets us for the whole day.

Some people have the happy knack of showing courtesy to everyone with whom the come in contact.

It is a delightful quality and one which brings its possessor great popularity.

Abruptness is a hard fault to cure, and yet it can be done.

You see, it is so easy to hurt people's feelings by speaking abruptly to them.

It may be done quite unintentionally, but nevertheless the fact remains that it is done.

And the funny thing about it is that those who are most given to hurting others are generally very easily hurt themselves.

The quickest way of curing a habit is by never forgetting that you are curing it.

If you are inclined to be brusque, abrupt and harsh-spoken you must keep the one thought constantly on your mind.

Underneath all that you are doing must run the refrain: "I must be pleasant; I must be courteous."—Good Business.

The latest event of interest in Anderson is the delivery by a well known and highly respected cow of that city of three well developed and apparently healthy calves.

J. W. Williams, an old white man, was arrested in Savannah Wednesday on the charge of robbing the house of Mr. A. H. Silcox, of Charleston. Mr. Silcox lost $500 worth of silver when his house was robbed.

When some men put a quarter in the collection basket it gives them a feeling of being real sport.